

Will the Real Dummy Please Stand Up?

By MMCS(SW) Don Forrester

"It's a miracle that Sailor is still alive," I thought as I arrived in the ship's wardroom pantry. "Machinery [in this case, a dumbwaiter] doesn't have a conscience when you put body parts in its way." Nevertheless, the victim aboard this ship had escaped with all his parts.

My astonishment quickly turned to horror when I learned how the Sailor had been injured. For openers, he and shipmates for several days had been putting the dumbwaiter's control switch in the jog position. Then they would hold a bypass button on the slack-cable device (designed to trip the motor anytime the cable goes slack) while running the dumbwaiter up or down. The button kept tripping because the cable was bird-nested around the drum at the top of the trunk.

On the day of the mishap, the Sailor had climbed half inside the dumbwaiter—something no one ever should do—to clean it. Suddenly, all the bird-nested cable slipped off the end of the drum. Down went the car, hitting the Sailor and pinching him between it and the trunk.

I was still mulling over this incident when I got back to my office and started checking the day's message traffic. One of the first messages I read concerned another Sailor who also had learned the dangers of dumbwaiters the hard way. This time, the victim was inside the trunk, under the car, trying to see why it was stuck on the next deck.

Everything was OK until a shipmate decided to load a bunch of dirty dishes in the car, which freed the tangled cable on the drum. After the car smacked the Sailor, he had to have stitches in his head, and surgeons had to fix his hand.

Officials from the Fleet Technical Support Center looked over the equipment involved in this mishap and came up with a recommendation for the ship and the Naval Surface Warfare Center, Naval Ship Systems Engineering Station to prevent recurrences. They suggested installing a lock box over the automatic controls as a means of preventing



It's a hard fall down a dumbwaiter shaft!

Sailors from bypassing these devices when something is wrong. Instead, they would have to call a maintenance technician.

Although dumbwaiters are machines designed to make shipboard life easier, these two incidents point out they can be your enemy if you abuse them. To avoid problems, use these hoists for their intended purpose: to carry packages, stores, parts, and other items from one deck to another.

Most dumbwaiters have a door that won't open when the equipment is in operation. Some are watertight; some are fume tight. The control system on dumbwaiters is automatic once the doors are closed. An over-travel limit switch stops dumbwaiters in an emergency. Finally, a broken-cable device keeps the car from falling in case the wire rope fails.

As we learned from the earlier incidents, it's also possible to override these safety devices and operate dumbwaiters manually. However, you never should do so, except in an emergency. Even then, you should follow published guidance¹.

MMCS(SW) Don Forrester was assigned to the Naval Safety Center when he wrote this article. If you have questions or comments about the article, send them to "afloat@safetycenter.navy.mil."



For More Info...

¹Guidance for operating dumbwaiters is in NSTM 572 (Shipboard Stores and Provisions Handling) and manufacturers' technical manuals.

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